Disaster Response as Secondary Hazard

Malka Older

Abstract Disaster responses are not always positive experiences for those affected. They can be seen as a separate, if related, event; a secondary hazard following the earthquake, flood, or drought. Existing literature argues that different types of disasters can have different effects on community recovery, with natural disasters triggering a therapeutic reaction in communities while technological contamination tends to have a disruptive effect. External response and recovery programs – led by NGOs, by international agencies like the UN, or by the government – can demonstrate the same characteristics described in human-produced disasters, and lead to the same fragmentation of communities. Like technological disasters, responses produce uncertainty: Who controls aid resources, and what is the best way to access them? Where and how will it be permitted to rebuild? What are the long-term consequences of participating in one aid program as opposed to another? When people believe that the government has the responsibility and ability to perfectly execute a robust, seamless response, anything less than that becomes a disaster: something that was done to them. This is complicated by the fact that domestic governments are chary of standard indicators for response successes. Without any way to define a "good" or an "adequate" response (bad responses are usually self-evident), communities fracture over their interpretations of what is lacking and whose fault it is. Responding to disasters is a humanitarian imperative, but where and to what degree that responsibility is held is not self-evident. Governments need to clarify their goals as well as their limitations.

Keywords Emergency management · Technological disasters · Theories of disaster

M. Older (✉)
Centre De Sociologie Des Organisations, Institut D'Études Politiques (Sciences Po), Paris, France
e-mail: malka.older@sciencespo.fr

J. Kendra et al. (eds.), *Disaster Research and the Second Environmental Crisis*, Environmental Hazards, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-04691-0_14

Introduction

As the number and intensity of so-called "natural" disasters increases[1] and technological hazards become more and more pervasive, our responses to these crises become increasingly important, as well as increasingly integrated into the expectations of our lives. National governments are putting greater emphasis on preparedness for disaster response of all types, whether through budget allocations or through the establishment or restructuring of dedicated agencies, departments, or ministries. International agencies, donor governments, and non-governmental agencies (NGOs) continue to professionalize, standardize, and technologize their approaches to dealing with the humanitarian needs of disasters located in countries unable or unwilling to manage the response internally. Responses of both types periodically glut the news media, and are romanticized in film and television.

Despite this growing attention to disasters and responses, the aid provided after catastrophes continues to be problematic. Many larger disasters – the earthquakes in Haiti and Nepal, Hurricane Katrina, the Southeast Asia tsunami, to name a few examples – have become watchwords for international or domestic incompetence or corruption. Even those responses are not known as high-profile failures – Hurricane Sandy, the 2011 Japan tsunami, Typhoon Haiyan, for example – did not, for the most part, live up to expectations, leaving dissatisfaction and opprobrium that exacerbated and sometimes outlasted much of the physical destruction.

For those involved these responses often go beyond disappointing or inadequate. In the aftermath of a catastrophe, it's common for communities or local authorities to refer to the response as an extension, amplification, or echo of the disaster. The overwhelming influx of NGOs and international organizations after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami is often called "the second tsunami" (for example: Fernando and Hilhorst 2006; Lund and Blaikie 2009; IFRC 2013). Oliver Thomas, President of the New Orleans City Council at the time of Katrina, said that "Hurricane levees, hurricane recovery, hurricane neglect and hurricane capitalism were worse than Katrina. And hurricane politics. They were category tens [referring in an exaggerated way to the Saffir-Simpson hurricane wind scale which goes up to five and on which Katrina was, at the time of landfall, a three]."[2] For those affected, the response becomes a secondary hazard following the earthquake, flood, or drought: something that happens to them, and that can often have a negative impact.

Technical failures certainly contribute to the negative perceptions of such responses: poor coordination leading to avoidable delays, for example, or dangerously inadequate shelters. Although these challenges may seem simple enough, judging the sufficiency of a disaster response is in itself a demanding problem. What constitutes poor coordination when there are no means of communication and no information beyond the operations center? What delays are really avoidable when

[1] See, among others, the International Disaster Database: http://www.emdat.be/disaster_trends/index.html

[2] Interview, May 30, 2013.

roads, airports, and all other infrastructure in an area are destroyed? Is two days reasonable? Three? When faced with a choice between quality and quantity of shelter, where does the line of adequacy fall?

Frustrated with the continued response problems, practitioners have pointed to a number of more high-level culprits. The idea of ownership comes up a lot, as does accountability. Daly and Brassard (2011) find that even when agencies claimed to be participatory, lack of rigorous participation mechanisms led to significant long-term problems in implementation. Some explanations are even more abstract: after Katrina, the report by the House of Representatives was titled "A Failure of Initiative."

This chapter offers a new framework for examining the disruptive impact of disaster responses, drawing from sociological research comparing natural and technological catastrophes. Rather than considering poor responses as well-meaning efforts that have failed in one or more aspect, this approach reimagines them as hazards in and of themselves: exogenous, human-generated events that may have a disastrous effect on communities, depending on various social-economic factors. The research explaining why technological disasters tend to be so much more corrosive for communities than the so-called "natural" variety offers new ways of understanding the damage that can potentially come out of a response. While technical failures can cause serious physical or health impacts, the discrepancy between ability and expectations and the uncertainty of long-term outcomes can lead to a more insidious risk. Similarly, disaster responses can change the narrative of the overall disaster event for individuals, households, and communities, often in ways that are problematic. In particular, responses tend to fragment that narrative, giving different groups vastly different impressions of what has happened, why, and how to evaluate it. This uncertainty can have a corrosive effect on communities, undermining any unity that comes out of dealing with the adverse event. Even if individual programs or initiatives aim to "build resilience" or "empower beneficiaries," the structure of the overall response and recovery may undermine any such gains by disrupting communities.

It should be noted at the outset that this discussion is not intended to equate disaster responses and negligent chemical or radioactive contamination. Most disaster responses are successful at helping at least some people, and perhaps even saving a life or two (although this is generally rare); most disaster responders work hard and take risks to do so. However, the potential negative impacts on communities are widely recognized, at least in the international humanitarian community (see, for example, Hofmann et al. 2004, pp. 11–12). Concerns include such issues as the fostering of dependency (in which those affected become dependent on outside help, reducing their capacity to help themselves), lack of accountability, and colonialist or white-savior complexes (in which aid becomes more about the egos of those providing the assistance than the needs of those affected), to name a few. Without dismissing those valid concerns, the comparison to technological disasters highlights parallels that offer a new framing of this problem. We can do response better, and we should.

Natural Disasters, Technological Disasters, and Responses

Existing literature in disaster studies is clear that different types of disasters can have vastly different effects on communities. Practitioner literature, which is concerned with immediate life-saving or dignity-preserving assistance along with fundraising, tends to distinguish between sudden (earthquake) versus slow-onset (drought) hazards (see, for example, ALNAP 2015). The academic literature in sociology, interested in longer-term impacts on communities, has focused in on natural versus technological[3] disasters as a key distinction in terms of the impacts on communities (Kroll-Smith and Couch 1990; Freudenburg 1997). After studying the effects of a chronic underground fire in Centralia, Pennsylvania, Kroll-Smith and Couch write: "There is a wide variance between the way communities respond to natural disasters and the way they respond to technological disasters. The altruistic community that emerges in the wake of natural calamity contrasts sharply with the social hatred that characterized Centralians' response to their long-term, humanly-produced disaster" (Kroll-Smith and Couch 1990: 158–159). After a chronic technological disaster, "communal bonds disintegrate and are replaced by emergent groups that compete for control of the crisis" (159). While so-called "natural" disasters tend to lead to unity and fellow-feeling, particularly in the immediate aftermath, technological disasters create stress and fragment communities. Conducting a review of similar studies seven years later, Freudenburg states that "the clear consensus of most of the best researchers […] is that the clear preponderance of evidence points to technological disasters as creating a far more severe and long-lasting pattern of social, economic, cultural and psychological impacts than natural ones" (Freudenburg 1997: 26).

A recent example on a large scale of "community" comes from the 2011 triple disaster in Japan. Aaltola (2012) notes that China provided significant assistance to Japan after the tsunami, perhaps in part reciprocating Japan's aid after the 2008 Sichuan quake: "Earthquake scenarios involve an affective climate that favours and creates incentives for acts of compassion. That said, the situation between Japan, China, and their neighbours soon became much more complicated when the dangers of the Fukushima nuclear emergency became clearer. The affective climate became radically different: China and South Korea, as well as many other states, reacted with suspicion, accusations and acts of containment – for example, import embargoes" (Aaltola 2012: 62). The same countries, the same timeframe: a perceived "natural disaster" leads to support – a support that was not entirely without risk, given the repeated strong aftershocks – while a technological disaster was met

[3] While this is the terminology used by these researchers, it is important to note that 1) some strands of disaster research question the categorization of any disaster as "natural" (it is the hazards that are natural, while the disaster depends on an interaction between those hazards and the built and societal environment); and 2) some studies contrast "natural" with "man-made" disasters, but use "man-made" to refer to conflict, rather than technological incidents. While some of the arguments here could be applied to conflict situations, they have been primarily used about technological disasters.

with blame and isolationism, despite the very limited impacts predicted by experts. While it is too soon for any long-term studies of the effects of these twinned disasters on communities, it is clear that while towns affected by the tsunami face many of the response-related traumas brought up here, those displaced by the nuclear leak have additional, and highly disruptive, sources of stress.

In searching for the reasons for this difference, Freudenburg identifies three broad areas: ambiguity of harm; the emergence of "corrosive communities"; and sociocultural disruption. The first refers to the pernicious effects of uncertainty; Freudenburg reports that "ambiguous probabilities of (physical) harm may actually lead to a more severe form of negative psychosocial consequences" than immediate, obvious damage (27). Uncertainty also plays into the development of "corrosive communities," which according to Freundenburg has to do with blame; both community divisions over whom to blame, and the stress created when outside forces – typically the firms responsible for the disaster – attempt to blame the victims of the disaster for what befell them. This in turn leads to sociocultural disruption, which comes as disillusionment with once-trusted authorities or institutions brings doubt to bear on the previously unquestioned social fabric.

Similar dynamics occur during disaster responses, even those for purportedly "natural" disasters. While there are obvious differences – responses are purposeful, not accidental or unintended consequences, and they at least attempt and often succeed in having at least some positive effects – the way in which responses are structured – in relation to the problem, in relation to the government, in relation to affected people – provides the context for the mechanisms described above to fragment communities and create long-term stressors.

Ambiguous Help

Rather than ambiguity of harm, we can describe responses in terms of the ambiguity of help. Responses generally present significant uncertainty about how much and what kinds of assistance will be available in general and accessible to specific applicants. Overall budgets may take weeks or months to work out. In domestic responses allocations usually need to be made by the national government, which takes time; international aid relies on a patchwork of institutional and private donors, with no certainty about the pace or timing of reaching the total. Figuring out the modalities of distributing that money takes even longer: even when some frameworks are in place from previous disasters, such as FEMA's block grants or an experienced NGO's cash-for-work programs, they usually need to be adjusted or at a minimum calibrated for the situation. In other words, people do not know how much assistance they will receive or when.

The uncertainty generally becomes worse, rather than better, as the response shades into recovery. Rebuilding requires complex planning pitting different interests against each other while timelines and budgets shift. In Japan, for example, the transitional shelters for people displaced by the 2011 tsunami were initially made

available for two years; delays in the construction of sufficient permanent housing led the government to extend the term for the temporary housing, leaving residents continually uncertain about how long that option would remain. Waiting for local governments to raise the level of the land or prefectures to construct seawalls means that the decision of whether to move back to a destroyed hometown or move on is extended by years. As with technological disasters, when lack of information about a potential pollutant can make it more difficult to mitigate the effects, ambiguity about assistance amplifies the problems of rebuilding.

Freudenburg writes that "in the case of many technological accidents, a pervasive uncertainty may be coupled with an intensification of residents' need to act. The victims need to decide just what kinds of problems they are facing, what their sources are, and whether or not they should take drastic action such as evacuation to respond" (28). Accessing disaster assistance similarly requires proactive persistence and continual choices on the part of the affected. In the international setting, beneficiary populations are often confronted with a plethora of NGOs and agencies, each with different mandates and programs; while individuals may not often have much choice in the matter, community-level leaders may have some say in what kind of assistance they receive and from which source, choices which must be made in the face of a daunting array of partial information (Bennett et al. 2006). Domestic assistance tends to require significant bureaucratic navigation; one of the most persistent criticisms of FEMA after Hurricane Katrina was the amount of paperwork required to participate in their programs.

Making decisions, either as a family or as a community, about these choices can lead to friction and resentments, becoming one of the factors leading to "corrosive communities." In Japan after the 2011 tsunami communities were faced with a collective dilemma: whether to move back to geographies that had just been proven to be at risk, or rebuild their lives elsewhere. Exacerbating this choice already plagued with uncertainties were the problems of group dynamics and economies of scale. The government's willingness to fund rebuilding of public infrastructure was likely to fall in proportion to the population, so large numbers of people wanting to move elsewhere could potentially make the original town less habitable for all. As one Japanese academic put it:

> Even within one family the father wants to return to the place they used to live, but the children and the wife don't want to or something like that, even within one family there are various opinions, then say the father at first wants to go back to live in the previous house, but doesn't have the means to rebuild the previous house, what should they do? […] If there are these problems within one household, if there are these problems in local area… (Kobe, 2013, Interview by the author)

The uncertainty of changing government policies, concerns about limitations of aid, and the need to make costly decisions among all these unknown factors put significant stress on communities, much as the decisions about dealing with contaminated ground or water do.

While I have framed this section as "ambiguous help," it is important to recognize that if people believe they are owed a certain degree of assistance, or if they perceive that other affected groups are receiving more aid, then the difference

between that expected level and what is actually received can be experienced as harm. If you believe that your house should be replaced immediately after being destroyed in a hurricane and instead you wait two years for an insufficient cash payment, you perceive that as losing something you are entitled to – above and beyond the harm of the lost time and effort involved in chasing that assistance.

Corrosive Communities

Freudenburg suggests that after the devastation of a natural disaster, "the aftermath tends to be reassuring and restorative. Citizens help one another. The people we call 'the authorities' arrive, proclaiming the end of the disaster and working toward the restoration of something like normalcy" (29). While the first claim, of spontaneous mutual aid, is vastly borne out by the empirical literature,[4] consider the second. What happens when authorities proclaim the end of the disaster when for the affected it is nowhere near over, as when numerous federal officials stated that New Orleans had "dodged a bullet" after Katrina's landfall (U.S. Senate 2006: 675, 487, 490)[5]? What if "something like normalcy" is a new status quo that excludes some citizens, as in some of the infamous "green-dot" reconstruction plans promulgated after the same disaster (Campanella 2008: 344–350)? Katrina is far from the only example. A 2015 report from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies notes that "At the end of the response, in an effort to re-establish a sense of normalcy, affected States may risk declaring the end of the emergency phase prematurely" (7) and cites the 2010–2011 flooding in Pakistan as an example.

Freudenburg goes on to suggest that after a technological disaster, "the victims can experience a second victimization, becoming participants in a socially corrosive struggle over affixing blame, and frequently finding that they become the victims of blame themselves" (31). This is a good description of many disaster responses, with Hurricane Katrina again being exemplary. The "blame game" among different levels and agencies of government proved divisive,[6] while the victims were blamed for not evacuating by politicians as well as academics. Landy (2008), for example, writes that "Those car owners who failed to evacuate in the face of mandatory evacuation orders that, however tardy, still left them plenty of time to leave, do not *share* in the blame, they *are* to blame" (187), ignoring the cost-benefit calculations of leaving, the failures of communication in explaining the risks, and most importantly the breaches of levees that citizens were urged to trust.

[4] as well as by my personal experience

[5] See also: http://mediamatters.org/research/2005/09/13/media-gave-bush-free-pass-for-repeating-false-d/133805

[6] The political fighting after Katrina is well documented; for some examples see Stolberg, "A Firestorm, a Deluge, and a Sharp Political Dig," The New York Times, October 27, 2007.

Although Freudenburg does not explicitly draw the link, there is an element of powerlessness here as well. Freudenburg's example describes community members faced off against the highly-paid lawyers for major companies. Experts play a key role in "natural" disasters as well, both at the implementing and at the funding levels, and it can be difficult for locals to have their needs taken seriously. A survey conducted in three different disaster areas for ALNAP's 2015 State of the Humanitarian System report (ALNAP 2015) found that "44% of surveyed recipients reported not having been consulted by aid agencies on their needs prior to commencement of the aid programming, while only 33% said they had been. However, only 19% of those that had been consulted said that the agency had acted on this feedback and made changes" (98). Combined with the need to act described above, this is a recipe for frustration.

The way aid is distributed can also be seen as related to blame. After Hurricane Katrina hit Mississippi, initial funding was available for those who had insurance on their house, but not for those who didn't, often leaving the most needy without assistance. Robertson (2015) paraphrases Haley Barbour, the governor of Mississippi at the time of Katrina, as saying that "critical lawmakers [in Congress] were dead set against giving aid to people who, in their minds, should have been insured against wind damage." It took years, and civil rights lawsuits, to expand housing assistance. While scarcity often makes it necessary to triage assistance in some way, these practices tend to leave unserved gaps, and with them resentment and division among communities. Fothergill (2003) describes a situation in which the aid is distributed in a more or less universal way, and "Emotions were especially strong toward those who were seen as completely undeserving [...] many expressed a disappointment in general about people who came in and claimed to have been victims of the flood so that they could receive public assistance and about town residents who were becoming too greedy, meaning that, while they were 'legitimate' victims of the flood, they were taking more assistance than social norms would allow. Residents quickly formed collective notions about what was deviant, 'greedy' behavior and what were acceptable levels of aid to accept" (665).

Sociocultural Disruption

In these ways aid can divide and, to use Freudenburg's phrase, corrode even a community that has pulled together during the initial impact of the disaster. Finally, Freudenburg points to another element that can cause what he calls "sociocultural disruption": "it may well be that some of the victims' stress results in part from the fact that the legitimacy of existing institutions can no longer simply be taken for granted after such an experience" (32). This is certainly the case after many disasters. Histories of Katrina are riddled with people exclaiming their disbelief that the images from the storm represented the United States, and not some far-away country. Multiple layers of problematic perspectives (racism, jingoism, etc.) aside, this represented a shattering of worldview: it did not seem possible that those conditions

existed in that place. It is telling, as well, that most people's disbelief and outrage seemed to focus on the slowness and inadequacy of the response, rather than the lack of preparedness and mitigation. In international responses, it is often the structure of the aid – external, delivered by foreigners – that highlights the incompetency, poverty, or collapse of the national government in question. While this may be less of a surprise, it continues to be problematic, since, as noted in ALNAP 2010, "Governments are often reluctant to appeal for help because it can be politically difficult for them to declare a disaster for fear of appearing weak and damaging national pride" (12–13).

According to Freudenburg, this undermining of trust in and belief in the legitimacy of institutions can "threaten the very system of agreed-upon meanings that allow a complex social system to function" (34). People expect the government to protect them, to save them from danger, and to recompense them when it has failed to protect or save them; when it does not, they are more hesitant to trust the government in the future. But why do people expect the government to protect them from hurricanes, earthquakes, and other natural events so calamitous that they are still sometimes referred to as "acts of God"?

Other Parallels

Before we turn to that question, it is worth noting a few other theoretical parallels between the characteristics of technological disasters and disaster responses. Kroll-Smith and Couch (1990) write that "chronic technological disasters are very class-specific, being much more likely in areas where the population is largely working or lower class" (160); the attributes of these communities – in terms of lack of education, lack of familiarity with legal proceedings, lack of surplus funds to cover legal battles, social capital linkages with decision makers, and so on – exacerbate their vulnerability in terms of precisely the types of social and psychological disruption the authors describe. Government- or NGO-run disaster responses tend to target similar classes, simply because anyone with more money and connections is likely to have taken more steps to mitigate the disaster (insurance, better construction, evacuation) and have less need of government assistance in the aftermath and/or access to legal or administrative assistance in navigating the bureaucracy in their place. This is not to say that the wealthy are unaffected by the frustrations of the disaster response, but they often have certain bulwarks against total financial ruin

Kroll-Smith and Couch (1990) put a certain emphasis on the duration of the risk, elaborating on the long-term stress of an underground fire with uncertain effects. The Fukushima Dai-Ichi accident offers a more recent example; although the accident itself was brief and the plants are now more or less under control, concerns about the degree of contamination and the appropriate amount of radiation for residential areas continue to plague governments and communities alike, particularly in the grey area around the exclusion zone. While a disaster response is obviously different from persistent environmental contamination, there are some parallels here

as well, of which perhaps the most obvious is in the example of the formaldehyde-contaminated trailers given to displaced people by FEMA after Hurricane Katrina; it took seven years for the major civil action suit to be completed (in favor of the plaintiffs, but for modest amounts). Even without the contamination, poor building materials that leave people in substandard housing can be a long-term effect leading to internal conflict (stay or invest in rebuilding). On a larger scale is the question of where rebuilding is allowed. Efforts to curtail construction in areas suddenly understood as dangerous – along the Sri Lankan coast after the 2004 tsunami, or in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans after Katrina, for example – often leave communities facing difficult decisions, angry and uncertain about where to place the blame, and with long-term, intangible and unmeasurable impacts.

Path Dependence and the Histories of Disaster Response

There are a few common threads in the theory of how technological disasters, and according to this chapter, disaster responses, create deep, long-lasting disruption in the communities they affect. Uncertainty is one, and related to that is the problem of expectations. To understand disaster response expectations, it is useful to look briefly at the history of responses, and how they have evolved into their current state. Up until now I have mentioned examples from both domestic and international responses in a somewhat ad hoc manner, but at this point it will also be helpful to examine more systematically the differences between the two, in part because they are in many ways opposed and complementary.

Domestic responses are those led and primarily carried out by a government (often with support from other actors) in its own country. International responses are implemented by non-governmental organizations, international agencies, and sometimes private citizens, generally with at least the approval and often the active participation of the affected government, and sometimes with direct support from other governments (usually through the military or other specialized groups). Both are relatively recent phenomena, and both have evolved significantly over the past century, and particularly the last 50 years. The different paths they have taken determine the strengths and blind spots in each type of effort.

The History of International Humanitarian Response

The concept of international humanitarian response is generally traced back to Henry Dunant and the establishment of the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1863; it expanded somewhat during World War I and far more precipitously during and just after World War II (see e.g. Davey et al. 2013; Kent 1987). While these triggering events were conflicts, in between wars the burgeoning humanitarian and volunteer sector began to turn its attention to “natural” disasters

(Davey et al. 2013: 6). In the1950s and 1960s humanitarian aid focused on development, but "from the early 1960s to the early 1970s 'relief cells', specialized agencies, and new departments emerged within governmental, IGO and NGO sectors to give specific attention to the problems of disasters and disaster relief" (Kent 1987: 45). As the aid industry continued to expand rapidly into the 1980s and 1990s, efforts to legitimize, coordinate, and ultimately professionalize the sector intensified.

This urge towards standardization and justification was in part due to donor pressure. Barnett (2005) writes that donors "began to apply 'new public management' principles as they expected humanitarian organizations to provide evidence that their money was being well spent" (730). At the same time, the expansion of the industry was causing concerns within the field as well. Barnett explains that "In response to the influx of relief agencies that were operating according to varying standards – a situation made doubly dangerous for agencies in the context of providing relief during conflict – and the growing evidence that different populations were being differentially treated, humanitarian organizations attempted to establish professional standards and codes of conduct" (729). The large number of agencies implied competition, particularly after large, highly mediatized catastrophes, as well as an extreme fragmentation of the response space (see Older, forthcoming). The affected area might be divided geographically as well as sectorally. Daly and Brassard (2011), in their study of housing provision in Aceh after the 2004 tsunami, describe a situation with multiple agencies providing housing within a single village; differences in provision led to a situation in which, according to one of Daly and Brassard's informants, "the housing development here is all mixed up, because the shapes and types are not the same, and this makes people in the community jealous" (525).

In order to deal with this problem – a serious one in an industry plagued by poor information and misaligned incentives, and competing in part on the basis of perceived virtue – the humanitarian community developed several initiatives to standardize and improve coordination. The Sphere Project,[7] a voluntary initiative created in 1997 by a group of NGOs and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, developed standards for humanitarian work and continues to elaborate these into additional areas. Meanwhile, from the top down, the UN has made a number of successive efforts at reforming and reframing coordination during disasters, culminating most recently in the cluster system, initiated in 2005, which defines sectors of intervention around which relevant NGOs meet to coordinate actions and emergency-specific standards. These and other initiatives provide some framework for standardizing humanitarian activity in the field, while at the same time providing mechanisms for greater accountability to donors, beneficiaries, and host governments. However, the system remains far from perfect. Besides the obvious difficulties in a completely voluntary patchwork of coordination, not all the responders in a given emergency are professionals who participate in this system. For example, Fernando and Hilhorst 2006 describe the case of one of the many

[7] http://www.sphereproject.org

private citizens who raised money, traveled personally to Sri Lanka, and implemented a relief project after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

While this elaboration of professional standards was related to accountability to donors and beneficiaries, it was also in part due to a growing awareness on the part of humanitarian agencies of the precariousness of their role. In an international regime focused on state sovereignty and shaped by post-colonialism, humanitarian actors are largely Western-based, non-state actors that enter foreign territory when the host government is in crisis and essentially replace its functions. To continue working, NGOs had to clarify their missions, mandates, and methods. This was largely successful. Attinà (2012) writes that "Over the last twenty years, the humanitarian norm has made intervention as a reaction to widespread human suffering and large-scale violations of basic human rights a legitimate action" (10). However, the continued existence of non-professional actors, the potential loss of face for host governments in requesting assistance, and on-going debates about different aspects of humanitarianism ensure on-going tension between NGOs and their hosts.

The History of Domestic Emergency Management

The increasing hesitance of states to allow NGO responses is also tied to the growing consensus that governments should be responsible for managing disasters on their territory. While this now seems obvious, it is in fact a fairly recent development for national governments to take on disaster response as part of their mandate. To take the United States as one example, Steinberg (2000) writes that "It is not often realized that no permanent means of government disaster assistance existed in this country until very recently. Only in 1950 did Congress pass legislation allowing the president to make disaster declarations to aid state and local governments in repairing public facilities (prior to this it required a special legislative enactment to receive such aid). Even as late as 1969, no formalized means existed to help individual citizens in the wake of catastrophes" (175). Landis (1997) traces the early development of federal assistance, which began with individual, named grants, often very different from our current conception – to take one painful example, "a $15,000 grant of poor relief for the white refugees fleeing St. Domingo following the slave revolution" – and shifted over time in terms of eligibility assessments, administrative apparatus, and mechanism.

In the late nineteenth century, according to Steinberg, "Cities commonly offered one another financial support in the years before the federal government became a major provider of relief" (17). There was no expectation that the federal government would step in, and indeed some wariness of any kind of outside assistance; Steinberg writes that according to some perceptions "accepting such money could compromise a city's rugged, self-reliant image, [so] some urban leaders were willing to risk the possibility of additional suffering" (17). It wasn't until 1934 that "Congress authorized the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to begin making disaster loans to rebuild public facilities" (67); in 1950 this was facilitated by a law that "allowed

the president to authorize disaster relief for reconstructing public facilities without seeking congressional approval" (86). Beyond the municipal level, "the needs of private individuals were to be tended to by the Red Cross, officially sanctioned by Congress in 1905 to deal with such matters. Not until Bayh sponsored the Disaster Relief Act of 1969 did such aid become more people friendly." (175–176).

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was created in 1979. Its primary role is designated as to coordinate the resources of other government agencies, rather than stockpiling and deploying its own, and as a provider of expertise and a grants manager, rather than as a first responder. One of the agency's main talking points after Katrina was that it was not and never had been a "first responder" (Senate 2006). However, this is often misunderstood by the public and by other arms of the government alike, and over time FEMA has become more involved. A long-term FEMA official told me, "It is mission creep to a certain degree. There is an expectation that in a big disaster the federal government will have a role operationally as well as providing funds."[8] Although United States disaster legislation is clear that local governments have primacy in disaster response, variation in local capacity and expectations of federal assistance means that FEMA cannot depend on maintaining its limited role. In the words of the same FEMA official, "you build capacity to pick up the slack, at the same time you're encouraging the locals to take care of themselves." A different FEMA official explained that "For everybody's… for the perceived railing of society against the federal government, at the end of the day, everybody still believes that if it's a genuine crisis, that Uncle Sam will somehow be able to help."[9]

This long-term shift in the government's role in disasters has two effects: the discrepancy between expectations and legal and operational reality; and a lack of clarity about the overarching rationale, the goal, of national disaster response. The assumption today tends to be that the federal government has a responsibility to protect its citizens from disasters, and the government both accepts and encourages this assumption through its actions. However, the terms and limits of this protection are left implicit and vague. Is the government responsible for replacing property? Helping the most affected? Helping the most vulnerable? Rebuilding in a better way? While individual NGOs have had to answer these questions to clarify their intentions to sovereign states and donors, governments tend to leave them to be decided in an ad hoc manner, furthering uncertainty and questions about fairness.

Contrasting Strengths, Contrasting Weaknesses

These two distinct paths have led to response approaches that create the conditions for the kind of community disruption described above in different ways. Despite the efforts at standardization, international responses, carried out by a wide range of

[8] Telephone interview, January 24, 2014.

[9] Interview, April 2, 2014.

actors with no common mandate, authority or legal system, continue to struggle with the challenges inherent in such a multiplicity of responder organizations. The phenomenon of convergence, in which the catastrophe triggers an unplanned and uncontrollable flood of human and material resources, can lead to an overwhelming number of actors (see Dynes 1970; Fritz and Mathewson 1957). This has certain benefits. The international system can be considered something of an almost unregulated free market, if one with a very skewed incentive system (see Older 2016, for a more thorough discussion). Competition and specialization led to a certain degree of representation among NGOs; in a large enough disaster, a coordination meeting is almost guaranteed to have representation from organizations specializing in gender, people with disabilities, children, and other marginalized groups, something that is far rarer in domestic responses where representation is shaped by the limits of democracy. However, this diversity at the coordination level can be problematic at the community level, where the fragmentation of implementation by geography or sector tends to leave beneficiaries under very different regimes based on decisions they have no part in and are not informed of.

Although the humanitarian community claims "double accountability" – to the donors who fund projects as well as the affected people who benefit from them – in practice both types of accountability tend to be weak, and the downward accountability to beneficiaries near non-existent. Donor funding exerts a strong hold on decisions and project design, and despite a number of innovative initiatives in participatory monitoring and evaluation, there is little holding agencies accountable for their work from a beneficiary perspective. NGOs and UN agencies are unelected. At the personnel level there tends to be high turnover in emergencies, and even at the organizational level many of them are in country only temporarily, leaving limited recourse. As Daly and Brassard (2011) document, even in real time complaints are often ignored.

Domestic response agencies, which have not had to explain their rationale or prove their professionalism (as opposed to volunteerism) in the same way as nonprofits, present a different set of issues. While the international humanitarian community has worked hard on standards and results-oriented, evidence-based evaluations, domestic responses do not use Sphere or an equivalent and tend not to have standards for evaluations. While FEMA has been making efforts to standardize their practices, these standards revolve around process – terminology for requesting different types of assistance, interoperable communications, and so on – rather than outputs – the minimum amount of water per person per day, the number of square feet per person in a shelter. Similarly, evaluations are often conducted by political entities (the White House, the Senate, and the House of Representatives all produced reports on Hurricane Katrina) with no common method or agreed set of indicators, objectives, or benchmarks. This means that even though accountability is theoretically possible through the ballot – and indeed, disaster response failures are said to have contributed to the fall of many politicians – the lack of benchmarks for performance or agreement on overall goals means that there is no standard to hold politicians accountable to, or objective answer on which politicians – from which level, branch, or department of government – should be held responsible.

Conclusion

There is an important distinction in the positioning and aim of the two types of response. It is not insignificant that international responders call themselves "humanitarians," while those in government are more likely to have titles like "emergency manager." International response is seen as stemming from a humanitarian imperative, an impulse of solidarity, a desire to help those who need it most. Humanitarians tend to be positioned as outsiders, working to help affected people in any way they can. Governments, on the other hand, are fulfilling a responsibility, even if one that is poorly defined. As the holders of power and authority in the status quo, one of their priorities is to protect that status, "managing" the emergency in a way that promotes a return to normalcy. This distinction is hardly absolute: most of the domestic emergency responders I have interviewed during my research are motivated by deeply held humanitarian impulses; on the other side, many NGOs are multi-million dollar enterprises with a large stake in the continuing status quo. Nonetheless, it does point to an overall difference in approach that is largely undiscussed.

As a humanitarian practitioner with a decade of experience who now studies studying domestic disaster response, my tendency is to see the former as "normal" and the latter as deviant. To me, emergencies are about humanitarianism: they are about threats to people's lives, livelihood, and dignity. However, I can recognize that managing chaos is a legitimate objective for a government. What seems problematic to me is the lack of clarity.

It is a truism in disaster studies (of a certain slant, at least) and disaster risk reduction practice that there is no such thing as a natural disaster. Under this conception, while the hazard – earthquake, hurricane, drought – is natural, it is only when it interacts with human settlements and their physical and social attributes – poorly constructed housing, poverty, lack of information – that it becomes a disaster.

This chapter suggests another interpretation of that phrase. If it is expected that someone – usually the government – can and should protect citizens from every calamity, then disasters are not random uncontrollable events or acts of God but somebody's fault. Uncertainty about what is a reasonable standard of protection and what to do to improve one's odds leads to division within communities. Questions over whom to blame furthers that fragmentation, and the answers, which usually include the bedrock institution of government, lead to disillusionment with authorities and overall the social structure.

The intent here is not to put the blame (once again) on the affected community by suggesting they are expecting too much. Rather, it is to suggest that addressing disasters as any other public policy issue – with standards, comparisons, and, ideally, transparency – protects both disaster managers and the disaster-affected.

Postscript

Since the writing of this chapter, the lead contamination of the municipal water of Flint is (finally) in the national news, and in an interview with The National Journal, the Governor of Michigan "conceded […] that his administration's handling of the Flint water crisis […] is aptly compared to President Bush's mishandling of Hurricane Katrina."[10] The response to Hurricane Katrina has long been shorthand for government failure, but it is striking that it should be used in a case where the government was at fault not only in its response, but for triggering the disaster. This comparison, however facile, inverts the argument made in this chapter: the government's active perpetration of a technological catastrophe is a political error equivalent to the failure to respond to a (more or less) natural disaster.

References

Aaltola, M. (2012). Theoretical departures to disasters and emergencies. In F. Attinà (Ed.), *The politics and policies of relief, aid and reconstruction: Contrasting approaches to disasters and emergencies* (pp. 57–75). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

ALNAP. (2010). *The role of national governments in international humanitarian response to disasters*. 6th ALNAP Meeting in Kuala Lumpur 16–17 November 2010 Meeting Background Paper.

ALNAP. (2015). *The state of the humanitarian system* (ALNAP Study). London: ALNAP/ODI.

Attinà, F. (2012). Introduction. In F. Attinà (Ed.), *The politics and policies of relief, aid and reconstruction: Contrasting approaches to disasters and emergencies* (pp. 1–20). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Barnett, M. (2005). Humanitarianism transformed. *Perspectives on Politics, 3*(4), 723–740.

Bennett, J., Harkin, C., & Samarasinghe, S. (2006). *Coordination of international humanitarian assistance in tsunami-affected countries: Evaluation findings: Indonesia*. London: Tsunami Evaluation Coalition.

Campanella, R. (2008). *Bienville's dilemma: A historical geography of New Orleans*. Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

Daly, P., & Brassard, C. (2011). Aid accountability and participatory approaches in post-disaster housing reconstruction. *Asian Journal of Social Science, 39*, 508–533.

Davey, E., Borton, J., & Foley, M. (2013). *A history of the humanitarian system: Western origins and foundations* (Humanitarian Policy Group Working Paper, Overseas Development Institute). www.odi.org.uk/hpg

Dynes, R. R. (1970). *Organized behavior in disaster*. Lexington: Heath Lexington Books.

Fernando, U., & Hilhorst, D. (2006). Everyday practices of humanitarian aid: Tsunami response in Sri Lanka. *Development in Practice, 16*(03–04), 292–302.

Freudenburg, W. R. (1997). Contamination, corrosion, and the social order: An overview. *Current Sociology, 45*(3), 19–39.

Fritz, C. E., & Mathewson, J. H. (1957). *Convergence behavior in disasters: A problem in social control* (Disaster Study Number 9, Publication) (Vol. 476). Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences National Research Council.

[10] Fournier, Ron. "Snyder Concedes Flint is His 'Katrina,' A Failure of Leadership.'" The National Journal, January 19, 2016. Accessed that same day at http://www.nationaljournal.com/s/352793/snyder-calls-flint-his-katrina-catastrophic-failure-leadership?mref=scroll

Fothergill, A. (2003). The stigma of charity: Gender, class, and disaster assistance. *The Sociological Quarterly, 44*(4), 659–680.

Hofmann, C.-A., Roberts, L., Shoham, J., & Harvey, P. (2004). *Measuring the impact of humanitarian aid: A review of current practice*. London: Overseas Development Institute.

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. (2013). *Stronger together: The global Red Cross Red Crescent response to the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami*. http://www.ifrc.org/PageFiles/135535/1255200-Stronger%20Together-EN-HR.pdf

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. (2015). *The impact of regulatory problems and the gains from legal preparedness in recent response operations*. Expert Meeting – 10 March 2015. http://www.ifrc.org/PageFiles/195860/IDRL%20Impact%20Study%20Draft%20for%20Expert%20Meeting_270215.pdf

Kent, R. C. (1987). *Anatomy of disaster relief: The international network in action*. London: Pinter Publishers.

Kroll-Smith, J. S., & Couch, S. R. (1990). *The real disaster is above ground: A mine fire and social conflict*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky.

Landis, M. L. (1997–1998). Let me next time be 'Tried by fire': Disaster relief and the origins of the American welfare state. *1789–1874 Northwestern University Law Review*, *92*(3).

Landy, M. (2008, October 21). Mega-disasters and federalism. *Public Administration Review, 68*, S186–S198.

Lund, R., & Blaikie, P. (2009). *The tsunami of 2004 in Sri Lanka: Impacts and policy in the shadow of civil war*. London: Routledge.

Older, M. (2016). Concourir dans un régime d'abondance: le cas du tsunami de 2004. In P. Castel, L. Hénaut, & E. Marchal (Eds.), *Faire la concurrence*. Paris: Presses des Mines.

Robertson, C. (2015, August 28). Mississippi's recovery after Katrina holds lessons for policy makers. *The New York Times*. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/29/us/mississippis-recovery-after-hurricane-katrina-holds-lessons-for-policy-makers.html?_r=0

Steinberg, T. (2000). *Acts of God: The unnatural history of natural disaster in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

United States Senate. (2006). Hurricane Katrina: A nation still unprepared: Special report of the committee on homeland security and government oversight.

Malka Older completed doctoral work on the sociology of organizations at the Institut d'Études Politques de Paris (Sciences Po) exploring the dynamics of post-disaster improvisation in governments. She has also published on competition in the humanitarian sector, the securitization of disasters, and disaster resilience, and has conducted research on the human and organizational factors of the Fukushima Dai-Ichi crisis. Named Senior Fellow for Technology and Risk at the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs for 2015, she has more than a decade of field experience in humanitarian aid and development. Her science fiction political thriller *Infomocracy* was named one of the best books of 2016 by Kirkus, Book Riot, and the Washington Post. She is also the author of the sequels, *Null States* (2017) and *State Tectonics* (2018).